

# The Upside-Down Kingdom

## INTRODUCTION

[You will need to go to a local fish-supply store and purchase the catfish I use as an illustration in this sermon. They are not expensive. Call the children up around the pulpit and let them oohh! and ahhh! over it.]

A. Behold the lowly "Upside-Down Catfish." *Synodontis Nigriventris*.

1. These fish are found in the murky river waters of Africa. They swim along the ledges close to the bank. Curiously, they always swim upside-down. Rather than having the usual protective markings of fish (dark on top and light on the bottom), these fish are "*Nigriventris*" - black bellied. They are dark on the stomach and light on the back.
2. But, since they are always upside-down, this works out to the same thing. They feed on insect larvae floating on the surface of these rivers, scooping up these larvae while swimming along completely upside-down.
3. I wonder what it would be like to see the world from the perspective of *Synodontis Nigriventris*?

B. Welcome to the Gospel of Luke!

1. The picture of Jesus given by Luke reminds us very much of our friend, the Upside-down Catfish.
2. In this gospel, Jesus is completely upside-down and backwards from what we would expect of God-come-to-visit. The Jews were looking for Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea.
3. Luke portrays the Messiah as a carpenter from Galilee, poor and rough-handed. Instead of surrounding himself with the rich and influential, Luke tells of a Messiah who hobnobs with tax collectors and fishermen. Rather than a Messiah who gloried in all that was Jewish, Luke's Messiah threw open the kingdom to the gentiles.
4. Jesus is upside-down in Luke. His values are different from ours; his goals are backwards from what we might expect of someone in his position. He preaches an upside-down kingdom.
5. The picture of Jesus given by Luke reminds us very much of *Synodontis Nigriventris*. In the gospel of **Luke**, Jesus is completely upside-down and backwards from what we would expect of God come to visit.

## I. THE UPSIDE-DOWN MESSIAH.

### A. Messianic Expectations - Then and Now

1. The Jews had been looking fervently for the coming of the Messiah for centuries. Yet most of them did not recognize Jesus for who he was. He was so upside down from what they were expecting, they could not imagine he would be the Messiah.
  - a. The Messiah was expected to be a powerful political and military leader who would throw out all enemies and restore glory to Israel.
  - b. They were looking for a second David—someone who dressed and acted and looked like a king. They were confused when Jesus appeared in a rough home-made robe, hobnobbing with the rabble, and with no "form or comeliness that we should desire him."

2. Nor should we be too hard on them. We would not have expected it either. If we knew God was about to take the form of man, where would we go looking for him?
  - a. Would we look in carpentry shops? We'd be looking in palaces or the White House.
  - b. The trappings of Deity - power, prestige, wealth?

#### **B. Messianic Realities in Luke's Upside-Down World**

1. The *finances* of the Messiah. Far from what you would expect, the Messiah was not wealthy or privileged.
  - a. Born in a stable (2:7)
  - b. The poor man's sacrifice (**Read Luke 2:24**)
    - i. Leviticus 12 specifies a lamb.
    - ii. A pair of birds was allowed only for the very poor.
  - c. "...no place to lay his head." (9:58)
2. The *friends* of the Messiah. Jesus seemed to have none of the social sensitivity we would have imagined. He knew none of the rich and the famous, he had no political "connections," he went out of his way to anger and antagonize those who were in power.
  - a. Hanging out with the wrong crowd - always with the poor and the powerless, the sick and the sinful.
  - b. Closest associates were fishermen and tax-collectors.
3. The *mission* of the Messiah. If you were to ask Jesus what he was about, what his purpose was, he would have given you something completely different from what you would expect the long-awaited Messiah to give.
  - a. "to preach good news to the poor." (**Read Luke 4:18**)
  - b. "to seek and to save the lost." (19:10)
4. The *politics* of the Messiah. In fact, Jesus taught exactly the opposite kind of politics that the Zionists of his day expected of the Messiah.
  - a. "give to Caesar what is Caesar's . . ." (20:25)
  - b. "Love your enemies, . . ." (6:27)
5. The *death* of the Messiah. The Jews thought the Messiah would live forever and establish an eternal kingdom.
  - a. Jesus makes specific predictions of his coming death.
  - b. Who could fathom God enduring the agony of a Roman cross?

## **II. THE UUPSIDE-DOWN PEOPLE.**

Luke not only portrays Jesus as being upside-down, he also shows Jesus looking for upside-down followers. For someone who wanted to change the world, Jesus chose the most unusual people for disciples.

#### **A. It is not the Rich who are blessed, but the Poor.**

Any politician will tell you that, to mount a successful campaign, you need contributors with deep pockets. Yet Jesus goes out of his way in **Luke** to alienate those who have money.

1. Those who love riches are roundly condemned in this Gospel.
  - a. **Read Luke 6:24-25a** - "Woe to you who are rich . . ."
  - b. The man who tears down barns to build bigger is called "a fool."
  - c. Jesus warns you cannot serve both God and money (16:13).

- d. It is his wealth that keeps the rich young man from committing his life to Jesus (18:18-30), prompting Jesus to remark, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"
- 2. It is the poor, in contrast, who are praised in Luke's gospel.
  - a. It is to them Jesus came to preach.
  - b. **Read Luke 6:20-21a** - "Blessed are you who are poor"
  - c. It is the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame who replace those too busy to come to the master's banquet (14:16-24).
  - d. Poor Lazarus, not the rich man, was with Abraham (16:19-31).
  - e. The widow, who gave everything, is preferred by Jesus to the rich who gave out of their abundance (21:1-4).

**B. It is not the Religious who are welcomed, but the Sinners.**

If Jesus didn't pander to the rich, you would think he might want to enroll the religious. But again, Luke shows Jesus making enemies of the religious and friends of the sinners.

- 1. Eating at Matthew's house (**Read Luke 5:29-32**)
  - a. Pharisees complain that Jesus would eat with sinners.
  - b. "I have not come to call the righteous . . ."
- 2. This sets the tone for Christ's interactions with religious leaders.
  - a. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is the priest and Levite who "pass by on the other side."
  - b. It is the Pharisee who is not justified by prayer (18:9-14).
  - c. Three times in **Luke**, Jesus is invited to the house of a Pharisee. Each time in confrontation and rebuke. There are 10 interactions between Jesus and the Pharisees in **Luke** - everyone is confrontational and antagonistic.
- 3. Sinners, on the other hand, receive a warm welcome from Jesus.
  - a. He is always in trouble for eating with "tax-collectors and sinners" (5:30; 7:34; 15:2).
  - b. Luke alone tells three stories which summarize his feelings about sinners who knew they were sinners and had no pretenses about their own righteousness.
    - i. He deals gently with the sinful woman (7:36-50).
    - ii. The touching story of Zacchaeus (19:1-10).
    - iii. Christ and the thief crucified with him (23:40-43).

**C. It is not Race that matters, but Heart.**

At the very least, you would think that the Jewish Messiah would emphasize the importance of being a Jew. With all the hatred of foreigners at the time, the Messiah would be very careful to stress "Jews first; everyone else a distant last."

- 1. Jesus affirms that what recommends a man or woman to God is not nationality but faith.
  - a. The Jews were preoccupied with being the "chosen people."
  - b. Jesus, in the gospel of **Luke**, is concerned with more than race; he's looking at the heart.
- 2. His ministry to the Gentiles.
  - a. **Read Luke 4:23-27**
    - ii. "No prophet is accepted in his hometown."
    - ii. The widow of Zarephath and Naaman were gentiles.

- b. A Roman centurion causes Jesus to remark, "I have not found such great faith even in Israel" (7:1-9).
- c. **Read Luke 13:28-29**
- d. Two stories about Samaritans are told - Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:30-36) and the 10 lepers (17:11-19). In both, it is the Samaritan rather than the Jews who respond in a godly way.

## **CLOSING: THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM.**

### **A. Paradoxes of the Kingdom of God**

- 1. It is the poor who are rich, the hungry who are full, and the sad who are happy (6:20-21).
- 2. Those who try to save their lives will lose them (9:24; 17:32).
- 3. The least are the greatest (9:48b; 22:26).
- 4. Those who are last will be first (13:30).
- 5. He who humbles himself will be exalted (14:11; 18:14).

### **B. Are you ready for an upside-down lifestyle?**